

Work is theatre and every shop floor is a potential Mecca for tourists. The visitor centre is dead, long live the corporate theme park. Are you experienced?



FAST FORWARD



WHAT: EXPERIENTIAL MARKETING
WHERE: At a revamped HQ near you
WHY: Live the brand



SAVIOUR TICKET

Written: Ian Buxton

AS we move into the global experience economy, consumers are valuing memorable experiences – and the brands that deliver these – as never before. World-leading brands such as Guinness, Heineken, Coca-Cola, Volkswagen, Kellogg's and our own Dewar's Scotch Whisky have recognised that their marketing must change.

Think about Consumer Relationship Marketing. What is normally dubbed CRM, has been the hot new thing in marketing in recent years. Well, it is great so far as it goes – and many exploit it very effectively. When it doesn't degenerate into the tinned Mozart and "push button 1, push button 2" telephone hell that destroys rather than builds brand to consumer relationships, it works well.

But consider some other trends, in society and in business. Media fragmentation, for one. The days of a national television campaign reaching mass audiences at affordable cost are now long gone. And this gives advertisers and their agencies big problems: how do you communicate with your loyal consumers when commercial television, the most effective advertising channel ever invented, now looks like Humpty after the great fall?

And what about changes in corporate ownership? Look, for example, at the brewing and distilling sectors to see multiple changes in stewardship in the last five years alone – who cares for brand heritage and preserves the brand DNA?

Finally, consider the consumer's growing affluence, in developed markets at least. In a market that now regards quality as an absolute given, what price quality-driven mission statements? Our pampered consumer now looks for 'experience' above all else.

Sustained competitive advantage will flow from a distinct and differentiated proposition that moves your brand beyond quality into a memorable and distinctive experience. Don't buy it? Then think Starbucks and remember what a coffee used to cost before it became a "double latte with skimmed milk and a dash of Valencia". Or contrast traditional brick and spade holidays with a trip to Disney or Universal Studios.

Leading marketing thinkers Joseph Pine and James Gilmore set this thesis out most

clearly in their ground-breaking 1999 study *The Experience Economy*. "Work is theatre," they argued "and every business a stage." They suggested that companies stage an experience whenever they engage customers and demonstrated how experiences are a fourth economic offering, with a value ranking above commodities, goods and services.

That's a pretty compelling set of challenges facing marketers. Richer, more fickle consumers, who are harder and more expensive than ever to reach, are demanding that they be entertained when they buy your brand – which must be of first-rate quality.

Meeting those challenges is what experiential marketing is all about. Brands are moving into the experience space. The traditional visitor centre has been left behind just as, in its day, it replaced the old-style factory tour. Think Nike Town, World of Coca-Cola and The Rainforest Café. For examples nearer home, turn to Dublin where Guinness has just spent £36 million on the new Guinness Storehouse. Projected to attract around 1 million visitors a year, it's transforming the face of Dublin tourism, as well as providing the trendiest of event or corporate hospitality venues in this most fashionable of cities.

What is it doing for the brand? Well, apart from preserving the unique and irreplaceable Guinness archive, it's pulling in a new, young audience and getting them to drink a pint they'd previously have given up to their fathers. And that's before you measure the column inches generated by the trend-setting design and media-friendly celebrities regularly seen sipping the black stuff.

And not just Guinness. If we look East, Heineken has remodelled its Amsterdam brewery visitor centre as the Heineken Experience, a space described by the brewer as "a sparkling combination of nostalgia and present-day technology". Heineken, the company says, "stands for enjoying life". In its first year it exceeded all visitor expectations and picked up tourism marketing awards from an appreciative city.

So it obviously works in the drinks market but surely we're all more sophisticated when it comes to a really important purchase – like cars, for example. Well, Volkswagen bought the experience theory

so thoroughly that it created Autostadt – a spectacular series of linked pavilions for its range of brands. At a cost of some \$70 million, it has brought over 2 million visitors to the company's home town of Wolfsburg and, literally, every one of those visitors has been brought closer to the brand's homeplace. Do they understand and appreciate Volkswagen better? You bet.

And, while they're there, Volkswagen is winning some key insights into consumer behaviour; conducting research and building a relational database for future exploitation and development. Every one of those 2 million visitors has been moved up the relationship ladder and primed for their



Ian Buxton of The Edinburgh Consultancy

next VW – or Lamborghini. To make it an even better corporate one-way bet, they pay to get in. Imagine that, consumers paying to watch your TV commercials.

This movement isn't just something happening far from our own shores – for once, Scotland is at the cutting edge. Two years ago Dewar's, the distillers, asked my firm to create a whisky visitor centre for them at their Aberfeldy distillery. We declined, recommending instead a state-of-the-art brand centre that celebrates the entrepreneurial genius of the founding family and allows the consumer to explore a journey through time and spirit; telling the story of the White Label brand. What was the point, we argued, in replicating the production-based distillery centre already done well by 40 or so of their competitors. After all, it's the brand that the consumer remembers, not the malted barley and

spring water that all whiskies claim on their factory tour. That may be factually correct, but it's boring and doesn't make an emotional connection with the drinker. So Dewar's World of Whisky was born. Our aim is entertainment, combining an entertaining day out with a process of visitor-led exploration and interaction that subtly informs and educates them about the brand, but is fun all the while. Guests see an introductory video, then use a hand-held audio-guide to explore the centre at their own pace. There are no captions to read. All the interpretation is held in the digital wand, available in eight languages.

The visit takes in four areas, which tell the story of the brand and the Dewar family. After that, there's a fun nosing challenge, designed to offer visitors some whisky connoisseurship, a shop (of course) and a tour of the distillery. For those who want to know more, the old filling store has been opened up and – to stretch legs and extend the visit – there is a ramble into the woods at the back of the distillery to enjoy the Perthshire air. Whisky Magazine called it "the ultimate Scotch Whisky visitor centre".

Dewar's uses the centre to entertain its trade guests and key customers, it features in international consumer PR and promotions and it's the high point of all sales trips to Scotland. Training and brand familiarisation courses are held there. Two years on, it cannot be coincidence that £2.5 million is being spent by the competition refitting Glenlivet distillery as The Famous Grouse Experience, due to open later this year.

Dewar's is in no doubt about its investment. "The return we get from an hour and a half spent in our brand centre is far greater than a 45-second television ad in the US," says Neil Boyd, the company's global brand director. "The innovative, high-tech approach is spot-on and visitors enjoy such an interactive experience."

There is independent visitor research to back it up, and growing visitor numbers, as word of mouth recommendations bring in new traffic. What better illustration of the relationship principle – visitors so sold on their Dewar's experience that they act as unpaid advocates, recommending a trip to their friends and relatives.

Based on this success, we've enjoyed the gratifying experience of the American



The Holy Land Experience, Orlando, Florida

marketing industry coming to Edinburgh for our advice. Since opening the Dewar's World of Whisky we've completed smaller projects in New Orleans for Southern Comfort and Atlanta for Coca-Cola. But the best moment was when Bacardi approached us to handle all the concept and design development for its brand homeplace in San Juan, Puerto Rico.

The venerable rum company were dispossessed from Cuba by the Castro revolution in 1960 and re-grouped on the nearby Caribbean island of Puerto Rico. Here, around 20 million cases of rum are distilled and bottled annually. The new Casa Bacardi will permit visitors to see the heart of the process but, more importantly, engage with one of the world's favourite brands and all its great history. The centre should open later this year.

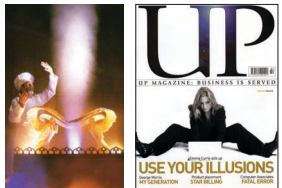
But can this go too far? Last year I visited the Holy Land – but avoided the suicide bombers and Israeli tanks. This Holy Land was just off the freeway in Orlando, Florida. Next to a strip mall and only a few miles from the Wet 'n' Wild Waterpark, The Holy Land Experience offered the chance to step back 2,000 years and experience re-

enactments of key Bible stories.

Constructed along the lines of a theme park, it features recreations of the Holy Land, such as a Jerusalem street market, the Temple on the Mount and so on. Live interpreters act out the part of Roman soldiers, the apostles, priests and sinners. There are models, tanks and shows. Technically, it's all very well done, with convincing set work and scenery and the historical accuracy is impressive.

Watching a gospel chorus, apparently in raptures (regularly on the hour), accompany Mary Magdalene as she sings about the Resurrection, while surrounded by American evangelists, I have to tell you, an unrepeatable experience, in every sense of the word. There are some things that can only be experienced in the original.

And that opens up a few thoughts about who should and shouldn't get into this area. The great brands come from somewhere, were created by someone and consistently stand for something. Apply those tests to Kellogg's, Volkswagen, Dewar's and you'll see what I mean. Volkswagen isn't in Wolfsburg by accident. That's where Volkswagen started and where the cars



continue to be made today.

Likewise, Aberfeldy is the distillery built by John and Tommy Dewar in 1896. They and their successors cherished it and, to this day, it's the malt at the heart of the White Label blend. It's only right that Aberfeldy is where you find the brand homeplace – somewhere the brand's roots and marketing DNA can be celebrated.

So, before commissioning your own experience centre, take stock. The consumer is not easily fooled and, if you want to enter into a deeper and more thoughtful relationship with him or her, make sure you've got something real to say. Make sure your proposition is authentic and unique. Otherwise, you will be found out – as lost as I was when I found myself in the Holy Land in an unholly land. Your consumer will find you out – and a false prophet of a brand will wither and die.

LIKED THAT LOVE THIS

info Ian Buxton is founder and managing partner of The Edinburgh Consultancy
contact ian@edinburghconsultancy.com